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SUBJECT: ELECTORAL REFORM CREATES INTRA-COALITION BATTLES

REF: A) ROME 3442
B) ROME 3936

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Political strategists tell us that electoral reform legislation likely to be approved by the Italian Senate in the coming weeks will force coalition members to run against each other in the 2006 electoral campaign. Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and his centrist coalition partner Pier Ferdinando Casini have already exchanged barbed comments and the Center-Left is famously disunited, as well. Intra-coalition disputes do not necessarily mean the coalition is about to rupture. A tightening campaign between the Center-Left and the Center-Right and intra-coalition competition mean we should prepare for strong campaign rhetoric, even among presumed friends. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) PM Silvio Berlusconi's Center-Right coalition pushed electoral reform legislation through the Chamber of Deputies on October 13 (REF A). The primary component of the reform is a change from a mixed proportional/majoritarian voting system to an entirely proportional system. It is widely expected that the Senate will approve the legislation in the next few weeks. Politicians from both the Center-Right and Center-Left already have changed campaign strategies accordingly.

ELECTORAL REFORM CREATES INTERNAL COMPETITION

3. (SBU) A proportional electoral system with an electoral list means each party receives seats in parliament according to the percentage of votes it receives in the general election. The system for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate will be significantly different (SEPTTEL), but both will use a list-based proportional system to determine the number of seats in the respective chamber.

4. (SBU) A Forza Italia (FI) electoral manager told Poloff in September that a proportional electoral system would free Berlusconi to campaign as the head of his political party, FI, and not as the head of a broader coalition. As such, he said Berlusconi could blame perceived policy failures on his coalition allies and promote himself as an alternative. The FI official told Poloff that individual parties in the Center-Left or Center-Right were more likely to gain votes at the expense of a coalition ally than from the opposition. For example, he said Forza Italia is more likely to capture voters from coalition partner National Alliance (AN) than from the Democrats of the Left (DS). He said campaign tactics would be designed to exploit those opportunities.

5. (U) Mario Landolfi, former AN spokesman and current Minister of Communications, said to the press that the Center-Right had developed a three-pronged attack. He explained that in the electoral campaign, Berlusconi, Casini and Fini would each campaign according to his own strategy, under a unified coalition theme.

ELECTION FIREWORKS HAVE ALREADY STARTED

6. (SBU) The national electoral campaign has already started. Though the public airing of internal coalition disputes is common, Chamber of Deputies President and Union of the Christian Democrats of the Center (UDC) party leader Pier Ferdinando Casini made the first strong rhetorical attack of the season on November 27. Casini said, "We cannot tell the Italians what they want to hear: that we have the magic recipe. Italians are tired of illusionists." This was seen as a direct attack on Berlusconi. The following day Berlusconi responded with irritation to journalists that he did not think Casini was referring to him. Berlusconi continued with his own criticism of former UDC Party Secretary Marco Follini, saying, "for the first time in history I completed government programs despite Follini and his friends."

7. (SBU) The Center-Left, with its coalition including relative conservatives and unreformed communists, is famously less united than the Center-Right. REF B reports on the dispute between the reformist and radical elements of

the Center-Left regarding Italian troop deployments to Iraq. Battles exist even within the radical parties, as well, with the Greens trying to show themselves more anti-war than the Communist Renewal Party to gain a few votes. Competition among smaller parties is particularly intense since a single percentage point increase could mean the difference between seats in parliament and political irrelevance.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: With opinion polls showing the Center-Left's lead slipping to a statistical dead heat with the Center-Right, the 2006 electoral campaign will be fiercely fought. The reintroduction of a proportional electoral system will increase competition among parties within the same coalition and add to the fireworks. The two examples cited above are representative of many other intra-coalition battles, and we should not be shocked to see even stronger attacks on members of the same coalition. END COMMENT.

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